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Generationality, Desirability, and Redemption: How Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj Articulate New Desi Masculinities in Stand-Up Comedy

by Madhavi Reddi and Margaret E Foster | Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT Desi creators in US culture continue to work within—and against—the white gaze, which divides them into sexless sidekicks or threatening terrorists. Two comedians who have defied these stereotypes and built their own expressions of Desi masculinity are Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj. Ansari's comedic persona is informed by his work in film and television, while Minhaj's comedic persona is situated within his work on political news satire. While Ansari is known for his “funny cute” persona, Minhaj portrays himself as a steady family man. Despite these contrasting groundings in comedy, they are comparable in their shared use of the stand-up genre to articulate their experiences as South Asian Americans. In this article we explore the ways in which Minhaj and Ansari use humor to construct their identities as second-generation South Asian Americans—separating themselves from orientalizing white narratives and the model minority myth that have long stereotyped South Asians in American entertainment media. We contend that they maintain cultural citizenship by articulating a new Desi masculinity that stands the test of controversy, ultimately granting them redemption by mainstream American audiences.

KEYWORDS South Asian Americans, comedy, masculinity, popular culture

Introduction

It's a cloudy evening in Brooklyn, New York. Comedian Aziz Ansari waits for his turn to walk on stage. He cracks the door open to a cheering crowd and

confidently walks onto the dais. Wearing a Metallica t-shirt and a casual pair of jeans, he sits on a single stool in the middle of the stage and begins his routine:

I was walking around the other day, and this guy, uh, came up to me on the street, and he was like, uh, "Hey, man. Love the Netflix show!" And I was like, "Oh, thanks so much." He was like, "Yeah, yeah, I really liked the episode you did on Supreme!" I was like, "What? I didn't do no episode on Supreme." And then I quickly realized he's talking about Hasan Minhaj. Patriot Act. Different show. Different guy. And he felt horrible, right? He immediately realized his mistake, and he was trying to buy it back. He was like, "Oh, no, no, Aziz, right?" I was like, "Yeah, yeah. That's me." "Master of None!" "Yeah, yeah. That's me." "Parks and Rec." "Yeah, yeah. That's me." "Treat yo' self." "Yeah, yeah. That's me." "And, uh, you had that whole thing last year, sexual misconduct?" "No, no, no, no, no! That was Hasan."¹

In a predominantly white American media landscape, stand-up comedy is an important site of identity construction. This is especially true for minoritized groups, such as Asian Americans, which include people from the Indian subcontinent. One type of identity that is constructed through comedy is Desi masculinity.² "Desi" refers to anyone from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and other countries marked as South Asian. Like other marginalized groups, Desi men like Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj are compelled to work against perceptions of interchangeability. Even though the two men are very different in their looks and comedian personas, they are viewed as one and the same because of their racial markers under the umbrella of Desi masculinity. This essentializes people of color by reducing them to stereotypes.³

Dominant portrayals of Desi masculinity tend to be defined against both the specter of the post-9/11 terrorist and as embodying a "lack of sexual appeal."⁴ Na theorizes the ways in which Desi masculinity "has been culturally produced in media and cultural discourse, rather than how Desis have practiced their own masculinity."⁵ Desi creators continue to work within—and against—the white gaze, which divides them into sexless sidekicks or threatening terrorists.

Two comedians who have defied these stereotypes and built their own expressions of Desi masculinity are Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj. Ansari's comedic persona is informed by his dramatic work, while Minhaj's comedic persona is situated within his work on political news satire. While Ansari is known for his "funny cute" persona,⁶ Minhaj portrays himself as a steady family man. Despite these contrasting groundings in comedy, they are comparable in their shared use of the stand-up genre to articulate their experiences as South Asian Americans, specifically straight, cisgender Indian American Muslim men. In doing so, they both use comedy to seek cultural acceptance, and specifically cultural citizenship⁷ even as they use charged humor⁸ to critique white supremacy.

However, both Minhaj and Ansari have also faced offstage scandals. In 2018, Ansari was accused of sexual misconduct connected to the ongoing #MeToo hashtag activism campaign; in 2023, Minhaj was accused of embellishing his onstage personal anecdotes to the point of "lying" about his experiences with racism. In both cases, each scandal seemingly disrupted the comedian's onstage persona: Ansari's loveable anti-womanizer playboy and Minhaj's authoritative truth-telling. While Minhaj and Ansari both navigate stereotypes and the politics of Desi masculinity, their divergence becomes apparent when we examine how their frontstage persona intersects with their expressions of generational identity and desirability, and their navigation of backstage scandal. We use the terms "frontstage" and "backstage" following Erving Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, which describes the social roles individuals take on and perform for specific audiences as their "fronts," contrasted with the more relaxed "backstage" away from that audience.⁹ Each comedian's successful comeback tour after facing temporary "cancellation" suggests that cultural citizenship can be achieved by artists belonging to minoritized groups via a "redemption arc." In comparing the two comedians' frontstage identities with their backstage scandals, this analysis examines how comedy becomes a space for both constructing and disrupting authentic South Asian American second-generation identity, particularly in

relation to the politics of Desi masculinity and the East Asian American “Model Man.”¹⁰

Stereotypes of Desi Masculinity

Comedians of minoritized backgrounds often seek cultural acceptance through their comedy: The ability to make and receive a joke about oneself and one’s position in society is a way of achieving subjecthood.¹¹ As Samah Choudhury observes, humor is “an avenue of social access and cultural citizenship within the contemporary secular imaginary of the United States.”¹² Regardless of one’s legal status in the US, cultural citizenship refers to a more abstract sense of belonging there, adequately assimilating to social customs and cultural practices.

Choudhury discusses how laughing at oneself and having a sense of humor is a valuable personality trait that ultimately establishes American subjecthood by giving comedians the power to critique societal hierarchies, while still being confined to them. Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj each laugh at themselves onstage.

Ansari and Minhaj also both use “charged humor,” that is, humor that is intentionally produced to challenge “social inequality and cultural exclusion.”¹³

The main target of their jokes is white supremacy and the everyday racism that they face as second-generation South Asian Americans. They build these personas against the backdrop of a long history of racialized stereotypes in American media. Most often, the Brown body has been articulated in media and public discourse as a threat in the post-9/11 era.¹⁴ Desi men are articulated against the specter of Muslim terrorists.

Comedians have sought to disrupt this stereotype in dramatic portrayals. One example is *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, which Shilpa Davé describes as “not just an alternative narrative but also one that reinvents the fear

and terror embodied by brown and yellow bodies and through the use of comedy proves that brown and yellow bodies can be harmless, normal, and patriotic."¹⁵ Instead of evil terrorist masterminds, Brown men can also be lovable, innocent stoners.

On the flip side, Asian American men have long been portrayed in an emasculated way—a sidekick to the hypermasculine white main character and, implicitly, a foil to the hypersexualized stereotype of Black men. South Asian American characters are played for comedic relief through their exaggerated accent or inability to “get the girl.” For example, Raj from *Big Bang Theory* is characterized as a “geek” and is shown in episode after episode to be inept with women. Apu from *The Simpsons*, though voiced by white actor Hank Azaria, has gone down in history for his accent—setting the stage for future actors being asked to perform “with an accent,” even if they are second-generation and speak with an American accent.

These portrayals, as either threat or comic relief, have precluded Desi and Asian men from being fully realized as cultural citizens of America, despite their legal status. Due to unassimilable differences such as physical appearance, accent, or customs—indicators of cultural citizenship—they are never able to be fully considered “American.”¹⁶ Regardless of whether the character is a first-generation or second-generation South Asian American (see below) or whether they have an American passport, they have all been essentialized within the parameters of the Brown threat or comedic relief stereotype.

All stereotypes are ultimately about reduction to immutable traits, which signal interchangeability: Which actor portrays a Muslim terrorist is beside the point, so long as the actor has a Brown body. However, Desi men in entertainment work against this interchangeability by articulating their own pathways to cultural citizenship and American individualism.

Ansari and Minhaj Navigate Interchangeability

Comedy is one way to overcome these obstacles and subvert stereotypes about racialized masculinity. Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj work against these stereotypes in their stand-up sets: Each comedian centers his daily life as an Indian American Muslim man. Both comedians curate their subjecthood as Brown men, particularly in relation to white women. Yet while Ansari is known for joking about singledom, dating mishaps, and his interpersonal conversations, Minhaj's comedy frequently veers into the explicitly political, poking fun at politicians, world leaders, and policy platforms. In this section, we discuss how these two comedians successfully cultivate their individual comedic personas and resist the interchangeability that results from stereotypes.

Aziz Ansari was one of the first Desi celebrities to achieve mainstream fame in the US. Ansari is a second-generation South Asian American, born in South Carolina to Tamil Muslim parents; he himself identifies as atheist.¹⁷ Ansari paved the way for Desi men in American comedy and shaped viewer expectations of mainstream Desi masculinity in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Ansari is known for his stand-up comedy, which incorporates feminist humor about dating and gender relations, and for his role as Tom Haverford on the hit NBC comedy *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015). After *Parks and Rec*, Ansari created and starred in the dramedy *Master of None* (2015–2021) on Netflix. The show was critically praised for challenging stereotypical representations of Desi men.¹⁸ For example, while Desi men are stereotyped as sexless, the opening scene of *Master of None* includes Ansari's character Dev in the act of having sex, furthermore, with a white woman.

Hasan Minhaj is also a second-generation Indian American of Muslim descent. Minhaj grew up in Davis, California, where he began doing stand-up comedy in college. While working on his stand-up, he was hired as a *Daily Show*

correspondent by Jon Stewart in 2014.¹⁹ Unlike Ansari's fictional personas, Minhaj gained fame for his political commentary, including being the first Indian American Muslim featured speaker at a White House Correspondents' Dinner.²⁰ After leaving the *Daily Show*, Minhaj began hosting *Patriot Act*, a weekly Netflix political satire comedy that ran from 2018–2020.²¹ He also performed stand-up. Minhaj is known for his cutting political insights and refusal to mute aspects of his identity for a white audience, waiting instead for them to "catch up."²² For example, he is well known for popularizing the Hindi phrase "log kya kahenge" ("what will people say?") and dropping uncontextualized references to Bollywood movie titles, songs, and dialogues.

Onstage, Ansari and Minhaj each invoke the other's comedy as a way of solidifying their own, separate personas. Thus, they define themselves against one another (as well as their other colleagues of South Asian descent) while invoking their surface similarities. In *The King's Jester*, Minhaj screens a photo of Kumail Nanjiani, a Pakistani-American actor. In the photo, Nanjiani shows off his muscular body, a direct foil to the historically emasculated portrayal of Asian men in American media. Looking at the photo, Minhaj laments, "Fuck you, Kumail! How dare you show white people what we could look like! That's why I love Aziz . . . he set the bar right where it should be, do you understand? Five foot two, built like a laddu, he's eating pasta all day, right?"²³ Minhaj proceeds to mockingly jump around the stage, imitating Ansari's energetic and childish stage persona, while the audience erupts into laughter. Through this comparison, Minhaj presents himself as occupying a space between Nanjiani's hypermasculine standard (which conforms to white virility) and Ansari's softer Desi standard. More importantly, the sequence highlights the three men as vastly different from each other, despite all being South Asian American men of a Muslim background. By creating new comparisons of masculinity, Minhaj moves away from invoking exclusively the white standard as an idealized vision of manhood—even as he acknowledges the white gaze as part of the larger context of masculine ideals.

Meanwhile, Ansari makes multiple jokes about the constructed interchangeability between himself and his peers in the industry. While acknowledging his sexual misconduct controversy in *Right Now*, Ansari recounts a time when a passerby confused him for Minhaj. He uses the confusion to set up a joke about framing Minhaj for the sexual misconduct he, Ansari, was accused of in 2017 (quoted in full at the beginning of our paper). Through the joke, Ansari illustrates ironically how he could use their interchangeability to his advantage, but of course, does not do so. In invoking each other's differences, Minhaj and Ansari create dimensions to the idea of Desi masculinity—all while poking fun at the interchangeability that some white audiences seem to find between them.

This connects back to the theoretical frameworks around “taking a joke” as a means of achieving cultural citizenship and acceptance.²⁴ While Ansari and Minhaj cite their own intertextualities with each other as a means of articulating their own identities, they always do it as a means of self and community empowerment; the joke is the indignity of being interchangeable as the only two Desi comedians to achieve mainstream fame. This tactic has a double utility: in joking about their interchangeability, Minhaj and Ansari both establish their own personal brands and subvert the expectations of broad similarity that groups people in the “Other” category together. In other words, while Minhaj and Ansari both have their personal brands, they also subvert stereotypes by asserting their own individualities. Both comedians are also able to use those negative stereotypes to empower themselves and elevate one another's comedy. Furthermore, they are able to do this in a way that not only establishes cultural citizenship, but also reshapes the way America views South Asian men in terms of desirability.

Desi Masculinity and Desirability

Sexual and romantic desirability has always been linked to race in the US. Within a heterosexual dating market, white men have traditionally been seen as the most desirable for factors rooted in privilege. Black men, by contrast, are framed as hypersexual. Asian men have been emasculated, as previously discussed. Ali Na signals how humor can be used to make up for unattractiveness in a white dating environment—what she calls “funny sexy,” a persona that is normatively white and can render a physically unattractive white man as desirable due to his wit and ability to take a joke.²⁵ In a society where desirability has been racially ranked, it is useful to think about how Ansari and Minhaj cultivate a desirable persona on stage.

South Asian American men have long been the butt of the joke (e.g., Apu); yet the reversal of roles for Ansari and Minhaj is located in who is the object of the joke. Through their use of charged humor, Ansari and Minhaj both maneuver their audiences to laugh not at their own failed attempts to adhere to white sexual norms, but at the fact of the white norms themselves. In other words, while Asian American men were previously laughed *at*, now they are laughed *with*. Ansari and Minhaj both cultivate personas focused on punching up humor, reversing their traditional roles. Further, because hegemonic masculinity is affirmed through sexuality, dating white women (the ultimate object of sexual desire under white supremacy) is often understood as one way Desi men can overcome emasculation stereotypes.²⁶

The fact that these men cultivate sexual desirability at all is a means of disrupting the cultural order—the normative power structures that govern how comedy and culture are produced and circulated, and how they maintain social structures. According to Mary Douglas, when things turn up in the wrong order, this disrupts culture.²⁷ Minhaj and Ansari make such a disruption via their punching up.

In the context of desirability, they also disrupt the cultural order by presenting as Desi men who are sexually appealing to white women. This Brown threat has often been understood as a threat against white women's sexuality, following in a long tradition of "sexualization of politics"²⁸ around racial minorities in the United States.²⁹ Indeed, white women have always been weaponized by white men against men of color in order to maintain social hierarchies. These fears and actions reflect white racial anxieties around the erosion of racial difference—and therefore white supremacy—through interracial sex and childrearing.³⁰ In this view, men of color dating white women threatens the future of the white race.

Kelly H. Chong and Nadia Y. Kim show how the hierarchy of desirability is shifting for Asian American men through the emergence of what they call "The Model Man," a hybrid masculinity that blends model minority traits such as education, financial stability, and good behavior with elements of hegemonic white masculinity.³¹ Through interviews with second-generation East Asian American men (who have historically been subject to similar stereotypes of emasculation as South Asian men), they find that this new "Model Man" becomes particularly attractive to white women who like that men of Asian background are less "obnoxious"³² than their white counterparts and still possess significant social and economic capital. In other words, for white women, being smart but not overconfident is the new sexy. By contrast, Asian women have a more critical view of Asian masculinity given that they associate Asian men with an older iteration of masculinity expressed by their fathers and grandfathers.³³ The Model Man is a new generational figure, as will be discussed in the next section.

As Chong and Kim point out, this Model Man aligns in many ways with what Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Michael A. Messner describe as the "New Man," a nurturing, egalitarian, and emotionally expressive middle-class male ideal.³⁴ Yet, as Crystal Parikh warns, these alternative articulations of Asian American masculinity also risk reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies by substituting Asian men into a pre-existing system of masculine privilege rather than resisting it.³⁵ In the

context of comedy, it is then up to comedians to present their articulation of desirable masculinity with some attention to these shifting dynamics.

Ansari and Minhaj cultivate sexual desirability through very different self-presentation styles. Na offered a theory of Ansari's 2010s comedy brand as animating a "funny cute" persona: rather than funny sexy, which is a white masculine mode of humor, Ansari performed funny *cute*.³⁶ Sianne Ngai identifies cuteness as an aesthetic identifiable by its soft malleability, childishness, and femininity.³⁷ Drawing on Ngai's work, Na argues that these vulnerable qualities of cuteness were generally filtered through Ansari's characters' "defunct sexuality." (A notable example is Tom Haverford on *Parks and Recreation*.) Ansari's characters, and his onstage presence, is funny because of his persona's clumsy and failed sexuality—an inability to get dates, a childish affect. Humor comes from what Na calls an "inelasticity of essence," whereby the joke is that Ansari cannot access the "white privileged form of masculinity." Instead, his ineptitude is enmeshed with his racial identity.³⁸ The fact that Ansari can't access the white male standard of desirability softens what would otherwise be a clear articulation of the sexual threat of his Brownness.

However, Ansari himself jokes in *Buried Alive* about using sex with white women as a means of challenging white supremacy:

If you're opposed to interracial relationships, guess what? I'm fucking white girls, there's nothing you can do about it. Any time I have sex with a white girl, I think about those people for a few pumps and it's such a great feeling.³⁹

The political point of the importance of interracial relationships hits hard; yet his otherwise sexually clumsy persona softens the threat. Ansari is physically small, childish in his jokes, and overall adorable—which, per Ngai and Na, always suggests nonthreatening stature.⁴⁰ Na observes that Ansari's cuteness simultaneously elicited "endearment and suspicion" from his audience, which she

further characterized as “adoration as a thin veil to practices of superiority.”⁴¹ In other words, Ansari’s persona can be indexed to a long history of the emasculation of Asian men in American media for the comfort of white audiences.

By contrast, Hasan Minhaj gets closer to the “funny sexy” persona. Yet he also undoes the potential threat of his sexuality through his marriage to Dr. Beena Patel, a second-generation Indian American like him. Due to his happily married status, he does not pose a symbolic threat to white cultural order via the potential of an interracial relationship. Minhaj also makes jokes in his stand-up about interracial sex, and specifically his encounters with white women; yet these encounters are firmly in the past. As a married patriarch, Minhaj is unavailable and therefore unthreatening to current white male bachelors in his strong family man persona. Additionally, Minhaj’s marriage status, which softens his sexual threat, allows him to be sharper in other areas of self-presentation. His jokes are politically aggressive—not grounded in personal romantic ventures, but clearly couched in the larger context of post-9/11 politics.

In his comedy, Minhaj is always seen in casual attire; he uses a stool in *Homecoming King* and frequently highlights his secure marriage. While he regales the audience with tales of dating white women in the past, these stories are always tempered by the implicit presence of his current wife, whom he hypes up onstage—frequently mentioning that she has a PhD vis-à-vis his own career as a comedian.⁴² The bulk of *The King’s Jester* is an ode to fatherhood, eliciting frequent “awwws” from the audience as he reinforces the importance of family and his role as a father. The stand-up special opens with a comedic but touching story about his fertility issues. Throughout the show, Minhaj ties everything back to his daughter, regardless of whether he talks about hate mail, the Saudi government, or venture capitalism.

Minhaj’s secure status as a patriarch, we argue, is key to his authority onstage and his ability to perform Desi masculinity beyond the “funny cute.” Ansari elicits a

protective response from his audience; Minhaj is the protector of his family. Minhaj is not soft, with smoothed edges; his humor verges on the vulgar, weaving serious accusations of racism and structural political critique. Minhaj breaks the dialectic between audience and performer needed to construct the funny cute articulation of Desi masculinity. Instead, Minhaj maintains power within the white masculine paradigm of power over information, bolstered by his position as a family patriarch. If anything, Minhaj treats the audience with a veil of superiority; he never invites the audience to look down on him, even as he makes jokes about himself. Instead, he waits for his audience to catch up to him.

This question of desirability as power reaches the core of stereotypes about the other. Desirability is in fact one way to articulate differentiation of the other, via fetishization. Stuart Hall offers the example of Saartje Baartman, whose recasting as the “Hottentot Venus” in the early 1800s reduced her to mere body parts, flattening her personhood to her sexuality—which was appended to her race as a Black woman in Europe at the height of colonization. Fetishism can be a means of representing a taboo because it involves a tongue-in-cheek disavowal, that is, a “strategy by means of which a powerful fascination or desire is both *indulged* and at the same time *denied*.”⁴³ This disavowal becomes a way for taboo topics, like sexuality, to be both represented but *not represented* at the same time.

Crucially, this description of the taboo is not so different from Na's articulation of Desi masculinity: how Desi men have been narrated, as opposed to how they have articulated their own self-representations of gender. Sexuality as it exists in a colonial and white supremacist matrix of heterosexuality will always be differentiated by race (of both the desirer and the desired). Today's Desi comedians have more latitude than their predecessors, even as they remain dependent on audience revenue—and, therefore, on maintaining a desirable persona for their audiences.

Ansari and Minhaj do not shy away from their otherness relative to a white media landscape, and they use their positionality to “punch up” and disrupt the cultural order that might otherwise fetishize them, reducing their bodies to their sexuality or their affable asexuality. Ultimately, the fetish gaze is always about maintaining power. Ansari displaces this power, accepting it but putting his own spin on it via the funny cute; he rejects the white gaze and reclaims the sexless stereotype. Minhaj, on the other hand, rejects the fetish gaze and the funny cute by remaining in his committed family life.

These shifting notions of Asian American desirability are highly implicated in generational identity. As Chong and Kim note,

Not surprisingly, this process is occurring particularly among second-plus-generation men, who, unlike their immigrant parents, possess the cultural, linguistic, and social capital both to challenge and re-appropriate the conventional stereotypes that have historically denied Asian ethnic men full access to patriarchal dividends associated with (White) hegemonic masculinity.⁴⁴

How Minhaj and Ansari articulate themselves against their parents, and their parents’ generation, plays a key role in how they construct a desirable persona. Through their different modes of engagement with ideas of otherness and desirability, both comedians reveal how Desi masculinity is continually being redefined—not just in relation to non-Desi masculinities but also through the generational positions they occupy within the South Asian diaspora.

Desi Masculinity as Generational Identity

Generational identity is a key lens through which to understand modern articulations of Desi masculinity. In the South Asian American context,

generational identity distinguishes between first-generation immigrants, or those who migrated to the US in their adult lives, and second-generation individuals, who were either born or predominantly raised in the US and have first-generation parents. This distinction is deeply political when read through the lens of racialized masculinity and comedic performance.

Minhaj and Ansari both use charged humor as a strategy for navigating their second-generation identity. As a tool of differentiation, charged humor enables them to separate themselves from orientalizing white narratives and the model minority myth that have long stereotyped South Asians in American entertainment media. These reductionist narratives often cast their first-generation parents as perpetual foreigners, meaning that their position in what Claire Jean Kim theorizes as the racial triangulation model makes them unassimilable, relative to white and Black Americans, and therefore always an outsider.⁴⁵ Minhaj and Ansari construct a new version of Desi masculinity that is more assertive, outspoken, desirable, and ultimately, more legible to Western standards of masculinity. This extends to their romantic lives as well; both comedians speak about their relationships with white women, a symbol of assimilation and desirability that first-generation men are usually denied in dominant cultural narratives. As Davé outlines, a key marker of generational identity is the accent, an audible symbol of first-generation identity that marks individuals as perpetually foreign.⁴⁶ Importantly, Minhaj and Ansari's lack of South Asian accents renders them "masculine" in a way that is perceived as more "American" and thereby more "authentic." Through these embodiments, they lay claim to cultural citizenship by challenging the perpetual foreigner status given to Asian Americans, bringing complexity to the orientalist homogenization of the Indian diaspora, and pushing beyond the veil of model minority exceptionalism.

When these comedians perform charged humor to establish cultural citizenship, they are not necessarily challenging Asian American men's position in America's racial hierarchy; such an upset to the cultural order is impossible for an individual

comedian to achieve. Rather, they are displacing the hierarchy's fixed articulations of ethnicity by challenging the white racial frames (such as orientalism and the model minority trope) that essentialize them through a fetishization of their culture as "exotic" and therefore subordinate in society. In *Homecoming King*, Minhaj offers a poignant illustration of this dynamic as he explores the gap between his own expectations of justice and his father's resigned pragmatism. Soon after 9/11, the Minhaj family receives an anonymous phone call saying, "Hey, you sand n****r. Where's Osama?...You can hear me right, you fucking d*****n, where's Osama?...I'm going to fucking kill you."⁴⁷ Immediately after, they hear thuds outside and run outside to find their car windows shattered and the contents from inside the car stolen. While an enraged Minhaj runs up and down the street looking for the perpetrators, he notices his father silently sweeping the glass from the driveway. "Dad, why aren't you saying something?" he yells aggressively. His calm father simply replies, "These things happen, and these things will continue to happen. That's the price we pay for being here."⁴⁸ Minhaj uses this anecdote to push against the expectation of subservience embedded into the model minority narrative.

My dad's from that generation like a lot of immigrants where he feels like if you come to this country, you pay the American dream tax. You endure some racism, and if it doesn't cost you your life, pay it...But for me, I was born here. So I actually have the audacity of equality. I'm like 'I'm in honors gov, I have it right here. Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. All men are created equal' . . . I'm equal, I don't deserve this!⁴⁹

This scene exemplifies charged humor, offering a layered critique of both American racial ideology and intra-community expectations of stoicism and silence. Rather than fetishizing subordination or assimilating into white norms, Minhaj uses comedy to "push the needle forward little by little,"⁵⁰ offering a version of Desi masculinity that is assertive, politically engaged, and emotionally aware.

Ansari, too, uses his parents—and his parents' differences from him—as material in his stand-up shows. In *Live at MSG*, Ansari describes the amazing journey his parents had to go through in order for him to lead a relatively frictionless life in the US. Ansari's material also references the subservience expected of first-generation South Asian Americans, describing his father's hiring by a racist head of hospital. Ansari relates the lesson he learned when his father decided to be the "bigger person," then jokes that his father actually poisoned the head of the hospital: "And that's what you gotta do when you're an immigrant! Handle your shit! Kill some racist motherfuckers if you need to!"⁵¹ The audience laughs along, knowing that it is, of course, a joke; yet the joke's catharsis lies in the discrepancy between Ansari being able to joke about committing murder over racism, versus his father's real-life decision to turn the other cheek. At the end of the show, Ansari brings his parents onstage with him to receive raucous applause. Ansari consistently returns to family life scenes with his parents, using their differences to sharpen his sets. He defines himself through difference—not just with a white comedic norm, but also from the first-generation vision of Desi masculinity, joking about his new entitlements to the convenience and privileges of birthright American citizenship.

Minhaj and Ansari are both second-generation immigrants, shaping themselves against their parents' generation of masculinity. And yet, as they age, new tensions, challenges, and articulations of masculinity will doubtless emerge, too. In his 2024 special, *Off With His Head*, Minhaj introduces his kids into the dynamic. In humorously describing an incident where his father and son are both throwing tantrums to him about their iPads, he positions himself as part of a "sandwich generation" that underscores the multigenerational labor of identity construction and signals the evolving stakes of performing Desi masculinity. Minhaj's son, as a third-generation American, might never know the realities that his father and grandfather contended with in the post-9/11 moment.

Ansari and Minhaj's ability to utilize their generational identity as a means of establishing cultural citizenship foregrounds the ways in which second-generation South Asian American men reshape the terms of Desi masculinity. Yet the cultural capital they accrue through this generational positioning, be it Ansari's appeal to a white dating pool or the authority Minhaj commands through his political storytelling, is not without limits—particularly when it comes to backstage scandals.

Controversy: Backstage

Through establishing themselves as desirable cultural citizens within the American cultural landscape, Ansari and Minhaj have expanded the boundaries of Desi masculinity and placed themselves within this framework onstage. However, each of these personas have been threatened by separate scandals from their backstage lives—and both comedians have used their backstage scandals as frontstage comedy material. In this section, we turn to each of the comedians' scandals separately, discussing context and how Ansari and Minhaj navigated those scandals from backstage blowback to material for their performances. Part of the genre of the stand-up comedian is to bend the reality between onstage persona and offstage anecdote. When offstage scandal challenges that onstage persona, the comedian's construction is put to the test. Ultimately, both Ansari and Minhaj achieved a redemption arc by making successful onstage comebacks.

Ansari's Scandal

When Tarana Burke's #MeToo was launched into a global movement in 2017, Ansari expressed immediate support for the movement. However, in January 2018, he became the center of a divisive #MeToo controversy when now-defunct feminist startup *Babe* published a pseudonymous accusation of sexual misconduct against Ansari.⁵² In response, Ansari acknowledged the account as

true, but maintained that he had believed all sexual contact he shared with his accuser was consensual.

The account divided Ansari's fans, as well as supporters of #MeToo. While some believed Ansari had done nothing wrong, others argued that he had inappropriately pressured the young woman into sexual contact.⁵³ Many observed that he had betrayed the feminist principles on which he built his career.⁵⁴ After the accusation, Ansari took time off from comedy, eventually returning with a "comeback special" in 2019 entitled *Right Now*.⁵⁵

Within the first five minutes of *Right Now*, Ansari addresses the scandal. Shifting quickly from an upbeat elevated tone as he jokes about the number of times people confuse him with Hasan Minhaj, his voice quiets as he recounts his experience at the center of a sexual misconduct scandal.

You know, I haven't said much about that whole thing. But, I've talked about it on this tour, 'cause you're here, and it means a lot to me. I'm sure some of you are curious how I feel about that whole situation. And, uh, it's a tricky thing for me to answer, 'cause I've felt so many things in the last year. There's times I felt scared, there's times I felt humiliated, there's times I felt embarrassed. Ultimately, I just felt terrible that this person felt this way. And after a year or so, I just hope it was a step forward. It moved things forward for me and made me think about a lot. I hope I've become a better person. And I always think about a conversation I had with one of my friends where he was like, "you know what, man? That whole thing made me think about every date I've ever been on." And I thought, "Wow. Well that's pretty incredible. It's made not just me, but other people be more thoughtful. And that's a good thing." And, that's how I feel about it.⁵⁶

He gradually raises the volume of his voice and says, "And I know this isn't the most hilarious way to begin a comedy show. But it's important to me that you know how I feel about that whole thing before we share this night together."⁵⁷ Thunderous applause follows and the show formally begins.

Despite the accusations tarnishing his feminist persona, Ansari's onstage address is grounded in feminist politics by way of acknowledging the scandal and framing it as hope for a better tomorrow: "after a year or so, I just hope it was a step forward. It moved things forward for me and made me think about a lot. I hope I've become a better person."⁵⁸ Crucially, Ansari also addresses how his accuser felt in that moment: "I just felt terrible that this person felt this way,"⁵⁹ he acknowledges, validating her feelings. This sensitivity to the zeitgeist and commitment to progressive politics reaffirms Ansari's movement into a new expression of his Desi masculinity.

It's worth noting that this taped, and therefore canonical, version of his comeback special is much kinder than early reports of the show's tour would suggest; one listener reported the earlier sets included railing against "cancel culture."⁶⁰ But the self-presentation and self-awareness that Ansari brings to the taped performance of *Right Now* persists: In *Nightclub Comedian* (2022), he sits on a stool in Comedy Cellar's intimate setting, eyes downcast, and jokes about switching out his smartphone for a rudimentary flip phone.

Indeed, Ansari makes significant changes in his self-presentation in *Right Now*. He reconfigures himself as a calm, reassured man who no longer runs around on stage but rather sits on a stool. With a seemingly newly formed deep voice, he undoes the soft edges of his previously feminine qualities. Notably, Ansari no longer wears suits, but rather dresses in casual attire, perhaps inching toward a white sexual appeal. Ansari abandons his funny cute pretense of eliciting protection from his audience and embraces a more understated performance of self. He discards some of his clumsiness and expresses more confidence in his adulthood and masculinity. In other words, his persona is less cute and more mature. This onstage change reflects developments in his offstage life, including his December 2021 engagement to and subsequent June 2022 marriage to a Danish scientist ⁶¹.

These changes in self-presentation suggest that Ansari changed his onstage persona to be more in accordance with the backstage persona that had leaked and been subject to criticism. At first, the change seemed permanent; in *Nightclub Comedian*, like *Right Now*, Ansari remained clothed in more casual attire. However, on his most recent tour, *The Hypothetical Tour*, Ansari revives elements of his former onstage persona. High pitched voice, full suit, actively walking around the stage all mark the tour. This suggests that Ansari was forgiven by audiences, then returned to his previous identity expression with some key changes that blunted the Brown threat he once posed to the white dating pool. His material now draws on fertility issues and his marriage. Thus, Ansari rejects the erratic dating anecdotes that had brought him audience laughs but also been the source of his greatest offstage scandal.⁶²

This change remaining permanent is crucial in the establishment of Ansari's redemption arc. The authenticity of his onstage persona was challenged, and then he did work to respond to that challenge, before returning to equilibrium. Throughout that process, the challenge to authenticity was remedied. Ansari was challenged and his challenge met with change, some of which stayed, while in other elements he returned to his old, beloved self.

Part of the ethos of the Ansari scandal was in the politics of consent. In his redemption era, Ansari's marriage to his (white) wife sealed off any potential future encounter that could be threatening in the same way to his onstage persona. In this way, Ansari affirms the feminist ethos that he constructed as part of his Model Man persona within the framework of a new Desi masculinity.

Minhaj's Scandal

In late 2023, Hasan Minhaj faced controversy, too—albeit of a very different nature—following a profile questioning the accuracy of the personal stories he shared in his stand-up specials, *Homecoming King* and *The King's Jester*. In this 2023

scandal, Hasan Minhaj was accused of lying about his experiences with racism by reporter Clare Malone from *The New Yorker*. The article stated:

In Minhaj's approach to comedy, he leans heavily on his own experience as an Asian American and Muslim American, telling harrowing stories of law-enforcement entrapment and personal threats. For many of his fans, he has become an avatar for the power of representation in entertainment. But, after many weeks of trying, I had been unable to confirm some of the stories that he had told onstage. When we met on a recent afternoon, at a comedy club in the West Village, Minhaj acknowledged, for the first time, that many of the anecdotes he related in his Netflix specials were untrue. Still, he said that he stood by his work. "Every story in my style is built around a seed of truth," he said. "My comedy Arnold Palmer is seventy percent emotional truth—this happened—and then thirty percent hyperbole, exaggeration, fiction."⁶³

Like the Ansari case, the aftermath of the *New Yorker* article caused fans to question the genuineness of Minhaj's constructed persona. Was the empiricist, fact-checking family man fabricating the stories that so many South Asian American fans genuinely related to? Their concerns were not assuaged by the fact that the article's release prompted the *Daily Show* to rescind Minhaj's offer as the full-time host. After a few weeks, Minhaj came forward with a YouTube video titled "My Response to the New Yorker Article" in which he acknowledged the allegations, apologized for letting viewers down, but then in his usual style, drew upon recordings of the interview with Malone, email exchanges, and other hard evidence to illustrate his claims that he was misrepresented in her profile.⁶⁴

One key element was that Minhaj discussed how his *Patriot Act* and *Daily Show* material was meticulously researched and fact-checked, whereas the personal anecdotes he draws on for his onstage work are often embellished and reworked for dramatic effect. Minhaj holds onto that line fiercely, even as he acknowledges that his stand-up work and new satire shows used the same stylistic format: assembling "evidence" to show on a screen behind him onstage. Whereas the evidence in a *Patriot Act* episode might be real statistics and news headlines, his

stand-up is marked by “evidence” like tweets, photos with people’s faces blurred out, and photos of himself and other celebrities—visual aids to help illustrate the oral point he was making.

This somewhat changed in October 2024, a year after the scandal broke, when Minhaj’s new stand-up comedy special *Off With His Head* premiered on Netflix after a cross-country tour. The show is different both from the YouTube response video and his previous stand-up work. Unlike *Homecoming King* and *King’s Jester*, there are no visual aids or snappy slideshows. Instead, Minhaj performs in a ring set up “like a public execution,” according to Netflix’s official source material.⁶⁵ The new stage is intimate, without a large screen to project such images, and Minhaj takes advantage of the proximity to his audience by addressing them. Instead of speaking to multiple cameras and referencing a PowerPoint, Minhaj does more audience work with the people in the room with him—much more like traditional stand-up than the political satire he was known for.⁶⁶

Minhaj’s content also shifts in this new special: His new jokes are more vulgar, blunt, and violent. He turns a joke about urination into a metaphor for Israeli bombs dropped on Gaza, which keep “missing” their targets and massacring civilians. The genitalia reference makes for a highly gendered set that seems to emphasize the physical, perhaps signalling less of a feminist appeal. Close to the 20 minute mark, Minhaj addresses the *New Yorker* controversy. Maintaining his stance that he did nothing wrong, he jokingly laments that he was caught “embellishing for dramatic effect,”⁶⁷ noting it to be the “same crime your aunt is guilty of over Thanksgiving.”⁶⁸ He calls it a “dorky”⁶⁹ scandal, which indexes to his fact-checking, empirical, and informative persona. After briefly addressing this, he continues the new blunt, violent material, every so often daring his audience to fact-check him, and painstakingly correcting himself in a joke about what kind of car he owned. The challenge to “fact check!” becomes a punctuating

call to action throughout the special, culminating in his howl “Don’t fact check comedy!” near the end of his set.⁷⁰

On the other hand, Minhaj’s commentary on the relationship of Indian American parents with their adult children remains resonant. In that sense, Minhaj’s greatest gift in his stand-up remains his ability to articulate and connect with second-generation South Asian Americans whose stories continue to be underrepresented in mainstream media. This ability to relate to the population he seeks to represent as well as establish himself within the American media landscape all illustrate how he embodies a new Desi masculinity that is aware, authoritative, and unyieldingly unapologetic. By refusing to cede ground on his position as an epistemic agent, Minhaj refuses to apologize for his experience as a second-generation South Asian American man, who has (in his own words) the “audacity of equality”⁷¹—including in overcoming his own controversy.

Redemption

Ansari and Minhaj’s scandals are impossible to conflate. While Ansari was caught in the middle of a #MeToo movement in an encounter of questionable consent, Minhaj was accused of lying in his onstage work. However, these two men’s scandals—and their comebacks—share one important element: Both scandals threatened the authenticity of their onstage personas.

In their response to their scandals, both men stand firm. Ansari maintains that despite the harm he caused, he never intended to hurt anyone; Minhaj maintains that it is absurd to fact-check comedy. In their responses, both men go against the grain of model minority stereotypes and emasculated depictions of Asian Americans as rule following and respecting authority, to articulate a new Desi masculinity that is not so quick to fold. In their comebacks, they prove that Asian American men, just like “cancelled” white comedians, can weather the storm of

audience disappointment and come back stronger, returning as prodigal sons to the auditoriums that eagerly await them.

In following these arcs, Minhaj and Ansari demonstrate a new axis of cultural citizenship: the redemption arc. When audiences are disappointed about the space between the onstage self and the backstage mistakes, Desi men can bridge that gap just as white comedians can. To be metaphorically booed offstage and invited back is another means of confirming cultural citizenship.

Conclusion

As the first Desi male comedians to reach mainstream fame in the US, Minhaj and Ansari defined themselves against one another. With so few Desi male comedians, it became an easy source of humor to joke about how two men with such different personalities and comedy brands could be thought to be the same. A decade later, in the 2020s, we are perhaps entering a new era of comedy that features multiple Desi masculinities, including imperfect ones in search of redemption.

Ultimately, a key to American cultural citizenship is authenticity. Minhaj and Ansari demonstrate separate redemption arcs after backstage scandals threatened their onstage persona. Yet in maintaining authenticity and repurposing these scandals for yet more relatable material, they are rewarded with audience forgiveness. Ansari and Minhaj maintain cultural citizenship by strengthening their authentic appeals to a new, Model Man-adjacent Desi masculinity, even in the face of it being threatened and needing redemption.

Even in its new, generationally fresh format, Desi masculinity is tied to patriarchy and heteronormativity. If Ansari and Minhaj were not cisgender, straight men, it seems unlikely that they would rise to the same level of fame—nor stage such successful comebacks. Their redemptions, and therefore their cultural citizenship,

is contingent on normative gender and sexuality. As third, fourth, or fifth-generation Desis continue to climb the ranks of Hollywood and amass followings on YouTube and other platforms, these standards will continue to shift. One thing that remains certain is that Ansari and Minhaj undoubtedly left their mark on new articulations of masculinity as second-generation South Asian American Muslim men.

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Author Information

Madhavi Reddi

Madhavi Reddi is Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Journalism and Communication at Lehigh University. Her scholarship focuses on the interplay between media, identity, and citizenship in the digital age—particularly in the context of South Asian American media representation. Her work has appeared in journals such as *New Media and Society*, *Communication, Culture and Critique*, and the *International Journal of Communication*.

[View all of Madhavi Reddi's articles.](#)

Margaret E Foster

Margaret E. Foster (Maggie) is a PhD candidate in Communication at Cornell University, where she studies gender and sexuality from a media studies perspective. Her dissertation project examines how literary spaces (such as independent bookstores and social media platforms) produce, promote, and protect queer literary counterpublics. Maggie's work has appeared in *Feminist Media Studies* and *Media Culture & Society*.

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